

A dramatic, high-contrast image of a stormy sky. Dark, heavy clouds are illuminated from within by a bright, fiery orange and red light, suggesting a fire or intense storm. A jagged, bright white lightning bolt strikes vertically down the right side of the frame. The overall mood is ominous and powerful.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL - I

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By

Father Michael Scott, S.J.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

I suppose that one of the problems that will continue to engage men's minds and trouble their hearts until the end of time has come is the age-old Problem of Evil. People are worried about it, and unhappy—and quite understandably so, because it is a problem and a very difficult one.

THE PROBLEM STATED

The problem might best be put something like this: There is a God, and we are told He is good, loving, and all-powerful.

There is also much dreadful suffering and unhappiness in this world.

If God can prevent this suffering and does not, then He is not good and loving, but cruel or, at best, indifferent.

If God cannot prevent this suffering, then He is not all-powerful.

In either case, God is not what He is made out to be. If it is insisted that He is still good and loving and all-powerful, they *why* does He permit all this suffering and unhappiness?

IS THERE AN ANSWER?

That is the problem and, admittedly, it is a rather frightening one. How are we going to solve it? Can we solve it?

Frankly, we cannot solve it completely. In our present state of life, we should not even expect to have a complete solution. To have such a solution we would need to know God's mind and we cannot do that in this life. We cannot do that because God's mind is infinite—without limit, whereas, our minds are finite—limited, and therefore can only grasp what is finite and limited. You cannot pour an ocean into a tumbler and you cannot take the mind of God and, as it were, pour it into the mind of man.

So, not knowing God's mind completely, we can't expect to know fully why He permits pain and suffering. Does it follow from that, because we do not know God's mind in all this—does it follow that He is necessarily

cruel or indifferent? Can't we attribute to Him, in His actions, motives at least as high and worthy as we attribute to our fellow men in similar circumstances?

A father, for example, punishes his child, a doctor or a dentist causes suffering to his patients by an operation or some painful form of treatment—they stick needles into us and do all sorts of terrible things—but do we, on that account, consider them cruel or indifferent to suffering? Why then, when we refer pain and suffering a step further—back to God—why should we immediately conclude that He is cruel or indifferent? Only purposeless suffering offends our moral sense and, as far as God is concerned, we have no right to say that, any suffering is purposeless.

GIVING GOD CREDIT

We give the father, the doctor, the dentist credit for their high motives—they are cruel only to be kind, they hurt only to heal and correct. Why then should we stop short at God and refuse to credit Him with like high motives.

It's so inconsistent, really, so illogical, so stupid when one stops to think about it. After all, if *we* can feel this way about pain and suffering, and act this way about them, and know that it is right, then why does it suddenly become wrong when applied to God, and what right have we to suppose that God doesn't feel and act about them that way too? After all, where do we get these feelings from, this wisdom of purposeful permission of pain, if not from God? Because—if God is to be made responsible for the pain and suffering in this world, simply because it is His world, then logically He must also be responsible for the good. As we shall see, it is the good for which He is responsible that explains the evil that He permits.

ONLY ONE SOLUTION

To assume that He is cruel or indifferent will not help us solve our problem. On the contrary, it leaves us with an even greater problem—the problem of good. To assume that He is not all-powerful will not help us, as there is then no logical explanation at all for this world and its happenings as we know them.

Therefore, the only solution must be that He is both all loving and all-powerful and that He permits evil, pain, and suffering precisely for our good.

We start off then by assuming that God does really love us, and then see if we can reconcile the pains and sufferings of this world with that love of God. We are entitled to make that assumption as it is not an arbitrary assumption. It is an inescapable logical conclusion from everything else in the world outside evil.

GOD DOES LOVE US

It is proved first by everything that is good and happy in our lives and no one but the most jaundiced will deny that the balance is overwhelmingly on the side of goodness and happiness. If it sometimes appears otherwise, isn't that only because ugliness strikes the eye as glaring and exceptional, whereas goodness and beauty are natural and ordinary?

Even if this were not so, even if there was no apparent happiness in this world, but only pain and suffering, we would still have the greatest and most staggering proof of all that God was not indifferent to our sufferings. We would have proof that He loved us to the point beyond which even love cannot go. That proof is in the fact that He Himself became man like us and, after a life of work and suffering, died as a criminal on the cross so He might save us from the consequences of sin.

Greater love than this no man hath than a man lay down his life for his friends. It is the supreme test, isn't it, and we cannot ask any more. Incidentally, it is His own saying. Will He then, Who loves us so much, will He allow anything to touch us that is not for our good? Can we not trust Him then? Has He not earned that trust?

At least let us not judge Him. To make a true judgment of anything we must know all the facts and in this matter, we simply do not know them. For us to attempt to judge Him, would be an unreasonable act and would be an act of gross impertinence.

STARTING POINT

So, as a foundation to build upon and as a safe base to return when we can see no other defense, let this be our attitude: God permits pain and suffering—we do not always see why, but we know that He loves us. Therefore, we know that if He permits pain and suffering it must be for our good.

I said a moment ago that it is impossible for us in this life ever to understand fully God's motives in this matter because it is impossible for us to grasp the infinite mind of God. However, can we perhaps understand Him partly—catch brief glimpses as it were of some of the motives that prompt Him to permit pain and suffering? I think we can and, for the remainder of this booklet, I would like to put to you what seem to me excellent reasons for God to permit pain and suffering.

SIN AND FREE WILL

First of all, take the question of moral evil—sin, wrongdoing. Why does God permit it? The answer to that lies in another question—is liberty a good thing or isn't it a good thing?

What do we prize most in this world? What is the one thing that we constantly assure ourselves and the rest of the world? What are we prepared to fight for, even unto death? Isn't it liberty? Isn't it freedom? Was any war ever fought where freedom and liberty were not predominant on one side or the other?

Well, God made us free and He would a service from us that is free. However, in practice here on earth, freedom to serve God means also freedom to refuse that service—in other words it means sin, or at least it implies the possibility of sin.

Hence, given free will, sin—or at least its possibility—is a normal necessary consequence, otherwise that freedom would be a mockery.

It is true that if He wanted to, God could force us to obey His will. However, if He did that, He would be completely nullifying His gift of free will and the entire beauty and value of man's service would be lost. It would be lost because only by its being free can man really show his love for God and his neighbor, only by its being difficult can man really show his worth. It might be argued that, although freedom is a precious gift to

those who use it rightly, it is a tragedy and perhaps even a final tragedy to those who are too weak to use freedom properly or who are so perverse that they misuse it. Following that argument, one could decide, therefore, that God should not have given freedom to those who misuse it, which means of course that He should not have created them.

The answer to that is that if God had refrained from creating certain people because He foresaw they would abuse their freedom, He would have been dictated to by His creatures, therefore dependent on them, therefore no longer God.

But leaving that aside, because it is a difficult piece of metaphysical reasoning, to follow it right through and looking at it from a purely human angle, don't we all agree that freedom of its very nature always involves a risk and that that risk is justifiable if the freedom is for the common good?

ABUSE OF FREE WILL

Let me illustrate that with an example I found in a book by the late Archbishop Downey. Suppose an employer had decided to give a bonus of £10 to each of his employees. Suppose further that the employer knew one of his employees, whom we shall call X, would misspend the money on drink. Well, the employer gives the £10 to every employee, including X, because X was one of his employees. Sure enough, X spends it all on drink, has a riotous weekend, fails to report back to work on Monday, and is dismissed.

Whose fault is it? Is it the employer's fault because he gave X a good gift that could have been put to so many good uses? Surely, the guilt rests entirely with X. X is the one who abused the gift.

Similarly, with God's gift of free will—if we misuse it, God is no more responsible than the employer in the example, above. Only we are responsible if we misuse the gift. After all, we are talking about free will. If we abuse the gift of free will, the blame is entirely ours, particularly when we remember that all the time God is helping us to use it rightly by the never ceasing action of His grace—Sanctifying and Actual.

SIN AND SUFFERING

Let us turn now to physical evil—pain and suffering. To begin with, let us look at the most obvious and intense suffering we see in this world—the ravages of war and its dreadful aftermath.

People say—you have often heard them yourselves—If God loved men there would not be any war. This is an understandable complaint, perhaps, at first hearing, and mostly made without bitterness—but in reality, this complaint is blindly and stupidly unfair. For it is not God who causes war, not God who drops bombs and brings death and destruction to millions of innocent people. It is man himself, man gone wrong by disobeying the greatest of all God's human commandments—Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

If man obeyed that commandment, there would never be any question of war. So, the complaint should not read, "If God loved men there wouldn't be any war." The complaint should read, "If men loved God and obeyed His commandment to love their fellow men there would not be and never could be a war."

MUCH SUFFERING IS MAN-MADE

Here, we come to the crux of this problem of human pain and suffering—so much of it is directly man-made—the direct result of man's disobedience to God.

Sin necessarily involves the violation of some human right (at any rate sins against the last seven of the ten Commandments) and the violation of a human right brings mental or physical suffering or both.

Hence, granted the possibility of sin, the possibility of human pain and suffering is another necessary consequence. We cannot have it both ways—we cannot be free and at the same time avoid the consequences of that freedom.

So let us not blame God, if seeing that a free and willing service is best, and creating us free, He allows us at the same time to suffer the consequences of that freedom—in sin and in the pain and suffering that are its by-product. He could not do otherwise in the present dispensation of His providence.

In fact, if He did prevent those consequences, He would be doing something that is not for our ultimate good. Because sin disturbs the balance of creation, and suffering as a counter-balance and a sanction is necessary to restore it.

SIN AND GOD'S PROVIDENCE

This is where God's never-ceasing love and providence come in—all the time, without stifling and nullifying this free will, God is working on the human soul with all the powers of His moral influence to draw it away from sin. God uses revelation. He provides the example of His own life as man. He provides encouragement, physical sanctions, and the invisible force of His grace. If He fails sometimes—as He must fail when He leaves it to man's free will to decide to obey or not to obey—if He fails there, still loving us in spite of our disobedience, He then takes those necessary consequences of sin—pain and suffering—and uses them to draw out untold good.

People either do not see that or they deliberately ignore it, but in the long run it will be seen that no suffering was ever wasted and that God drew out of it blessings that far and away counter-balance the original evil.

That is God's way. He lets men sin because He would have their service a free one—He lets necessary physical consequences of pain and suffering ensue, and then sets in to repair the damage done, working, as St. Paul tells us, –all things together unto good.

What a loving and patient Father we have in our God.

THE VALUE OF SICKNESS AND TRIAL

Now let us look at pain and suffering that are not so obviously the direct result of man's sin, but that appear to come more directly from the hand of God Himself. I refer to trials like ordinary sickness and pain and the various sorrows and disappointments we experience in this life. I also refer to the more obvious trials—usually referred to as Acts of God—like plagues, storms and earthquakes, famine, floods, and droughts.

Why does God send these trials or why does He allow them?

Well, first, they may be sent as a corrective punishment for sin—a sanction. I say this guardedly because we really have no way of knowing in any individual case. However, if it is punishment for sin, surely no one can question the justice of it? We have offended God, and to correct the balance we must be punished—either here or in the hereafter. If God sees fit to correct us now through suffering, then surely there is no cause for complaint. However, if we see it properly, with gratitude, we see that it comes now when we can best profit from it—for ourselves and for others.

THIS LIFE IS A TRIAL FOR ETERNITY

But leaving all that aside, the possibility of its being sent as a sanction for sin—much more frequently and more importantly, therefore we can be sure it is sent as a trial.

This life is not an end in itself, it is meant merely as a trial, a test of our fitness to see whether we are worthy of our final end—seeing and enjoying God forever in Heaven.

What sort of a test would it be if there were no pain and suffering in this world—no hardship, no sorrow, no unhappiness—and our life here were just one, long, unbroken round of happiness and pleasure? It would be a mockery, wouldn't it, and not worthy of the name of trial?

What value would we place on that next life with God? In fact, would we even want it, if this life were so easy and the next life could be won simply by drifting along pleasantly in this life?

We just do not value the things that are ours for the asking and we have little or no respect for the man who has never had to fight for the things that he calls his own. The real prizes of life are those that are hardest to win and the real heroes of this world are those who have fought and suffered and won at last to victory in the hard and difficult way.

Would we have it otherwise with the greatest prize of all, and the greatest victory, the winning of Heaven?

SUFFERING-THE BREEDING GROUND FOR VIRTUE

What are the virtues we prize most in men in the purely natural order? We prize courage, strength, and patience, surely, and sympathy, kindness, and understanding. Where will you find a better breeding-ground for those than in hardship and in suffering? In fact, what other breeding-ground is there?

How is the fine, tough, resilient steel of a Toledo blade forged? It is forged by tempering, by being tried by heat and cold, by being hammered, bent, and twisted. Even so is character wrought in men. Look around you among your own friends and those whose character you admire and ask yourselves where those qualities have come from that make them what they are. You will find, I think, that they have their roots in pain and struggle and sorrow—the more heroic and more truly human of them.

Look at the great saints of Christendom—the early Christian martyrs and the present day martyrs behind the Iron Curtain—the great missionaries and all the rest—look at the terrible pain and suffering and hardship they endured in their lives.

Oh yes, you might say, but they were special cases—they were saints and they were able to endure their sufferings because they were saints.

Ah no, it is the other way round. They did not take their pain and suffering that way because they were saints—on the contrary, they became saints precisely because they took it that way.

That is precisely why God sends us pain and suffering, that we too might be purified by it, that we too might one day become saints. He used this method with Saint Paul to make him a great apostle. When He appeared to Ananias in a vision, He said, “This man is to me a vessel of election, and I will show him what great things he must *suffer* for my *sake*.” *We might have expected, “I will show him what great things he must do for my sake.” No, he highlighted something entirely different—suffer.*

There is no easy way to acquire character—there is no easy way to Heaven—like all great prizes they are taken only by storm—and the storming is done through suffering.

The storming may be hard—but how great the prize. Saint Paul knew what he was talking about in this matter of suffering, as God had promised that

he would—yet he could sum it all up at the end—I reckon that the sufferings of this life are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to come, that shall be revealed in us. (Rom. 8, 18.)

CHRIST'S INVITATION

I have been trying to show how from a human point of view we can come to see some of the reasons behind God's permission of suffering.

However, even if we could not see at all, we would still have something to cling to, the greatest help of all, in the example of Our Lord's own life. One thing only mattered for Our Lord—that He should do His Father's will. If it was the will of His Father that He should fail, humanly speaking, and suffer and die on the Cross, then "Father, not My will but Thine be done" was His cry, even in the depths of His agony. To be like Christ, not only in the fact of His obedience but even in the way in which it was asked, that is what God wants from us -as well. -Unless a man take up his cross and follow Me, he cannot be My disciple—those are Our Lord's own words, and when He said disciple' He meant quite literally a follower, one who would be with Him always, to share with Him in His work no matter what it might be.

Now the redemption of the world from sin was won by Christ's suffering and death, not just because of His suffering and death but because they were the Father's will. If we are to be His disciples, then, not merely benefiting by the redemption but actually sharing in its winning, taking take an active part in the whole redemptive plan, it will be along the same path that He took and by the same means—by pain and suffering and death offered for that purpose.

The disciple is not above His Master—nor does he wish to be. Christ suffered and died that He might redeem the world from sin; for His disciples that is enough—they will follow in His footsteps, blindly unto the end.

LIFE – GOD'S TAPESTRY

May I conclude with an illustration that I think might be of some help? We had an exhibition of French paintings here last year and we all got so excited about it—one way or another. One off the highlights of the

exhibition was a lovely tapestry by Lurcat. The tapestry was a glorious poem of color—greens and limes and russets, silver, amber and black.

Curious individuals, like myself, went up to it when they hoped no one was looking, lifted up the corner and sneaked a quick look at the back. What a shock they had! Yet, they had a lesson as well. At the back of the tapestry was literally chaos, or at least apparent chaos. It was a tangled mass of loose ends, loops, knots, and jumbled colors. It made you blink, stare, and wonder until you turned back to the finished side and examined it again in some detail—and then suddenly you knew.

Of course—how could it be otherwise—how could he have achieved that effect without all those apparently jumbled bits at the back? They were not haphazard or careless at all, but all part of a carefully thought-out plan to achieve that glorious result.

Are we not doing something the same in this world—looking at the unfinished picture—the reverse side of the tapestry that God the great artist is working out to His plan, as Lurcat did at Aubusson? We see only one side—the reverse—and even that is unfinished—but God—He sees it all—as it comes out now, but even more importantly He sees it as it will come out when all His work is finished. If having seen Lurcat's work we can trust him to know what he is doing, I think we may safely trust God—even though as yet we cannot see. After all, it was He who made Lurcat and gave him his wonderful gift.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

Trust—that is the important word. There is so much more that could be said on this puzzling problem of evil—but it can all be summed up in that one word, –trust. That is where we started—that is where we must end—there is no answer otherwise.

Trust—it is the true basis of all enduring love—its hard-earned price and also its greatest reward. It is based, of course, on knowledge—an intimate knowledge of the person and an abiding certainty of his love. It holds true just as surely when the person we love is God.

If we truly know God, we trust Him because we know beyond doubt that He loves us, and that the only reason in fact that He made us was that He might share His goodness with us.

Trusting Him, we accept without question from His hands whatever He may send us in the way of suffering and sorrow, knowing that however much it hurt, He sends it for our good. The problem, then, to one who trusts in God, is really no longer a problem, but a test of his trust.

One day that trust will be rewarded— that day when –God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes, and death shall be no more, nor mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow shall be any more, for the former things will have passed away.

In the meantime, we wait and trust, echoing the words of St. Paul when he said, “What, then, shall separate us from the love of God? Shall tribulation, distress, famine, nakedness, danger, persecution, or the sword? For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor might, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord.”

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